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U.S. Might Back Joint Invasion Of Nicaragua

There are alarming indications that the Reagan administration is thinking seriously of giving "logistical support" to an invasion of Nicaragua by Honduras and Guatemala.

High-level Pentagon and intelligence officials have expressed confidence that the Honduran and Guatemalan armies, trained and armed by the United States and Israel, can "take out Nicaragua" without any need for a commitment of U.S. combat troops.

But they say a joint invasion force, coordinating its efforts with the anti-Sandinista guerrilla groups already fighting the leftist Managua regime, would need U.S. supplies to carry off the attack.

There would be abundant reasons for an administration decision to support an invasion of Nicaragua, and one would be political: the president figures it would win back his disaffected New Right supporters in time for his reelection bid.

The presence of a Cuban-backed regime in Managua has long been a source of irritation for the right wing, and the Reagan administra-

tion's supposedly covert support for the anti-Sandinista rebels hasn't succeeded in toppling the Marxist junta in Managua.

Far from satiating the New Right's anticommunist zeal, the invasion of tiny Grenada may have only whetted its appetite for even more ambitious military adventures in the hemisphere. In fact, polls showing overwhelming public support for the Grenada invasion may be the most persuasive factor in the president's decision on Nicaragua.

Meanwhile, intelligence sources have told my associates Jon Lee Anderson and Dale Van Atta that Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, head of the Honduran armed forces, has told U.S. officials privately that he intends to celebrate his next birthday in Managua. His birthday is Dec. 12.

Just how Honduras and Guatemala expect to vanquish the Nicaraguan Army—Central America's largest—is not clear. But here are some of the possibilities:

- They could invoke the recently revived Central American Security Council (Condeca) to achieve a united front of Nicaragua's neighbors in the face of "provocation" by Managua. This provocation could take the form of Sandinista forces crossing into either Honduras or Costa Rica in hot pursuit of guerrillas taking sanctuary there—something Managua has been careful to avoid.

- If the Nicaraguan rebel forces could agree on a combined operation, such as a pincer movement from north and south along the Atlantic coast, they might seize a large enough "liberated zone" to ask for international recognition. The Reagan administration and the Condeca countries would grant this, and the rebels then would appeal for Condeca's help in seizing the rest of Nicaragua.

Emboldening the Sandinistas' enemies is Fidel Castro's recent admission that he would be unable to send Cuban help because of "superior American force." So Managua would have to rely on its own forces and the estimated 6,000 Cuban advisers already in Nicaragua.

Left-wing sources allied with Guatemalan and Salvadoran guerrillas have been denouncing recent "mobilizations" in Guatemala and Honduras. Officially, the troop movements have been described as "routine exercises."

But a high Guatemalan military officer, asked if any action against Nicaragua is planned, laughed and said: "Well, I can't speak for Guatemala, but from statements being made by U.S. officials like Secretary of Defense [Caspar W.] Weinberger, I'd say there is an open possibility."

Footnote: As I went to press, a White House spokesman had not responded to a request for comment.